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ABSTRACT

Introductory remarks, critical of teaching methods in language programs, lead the author to explore the concept of "culture" and its place in the curriculum. Several definitions of culture are proposed and followed by contrastive examples in French and Spanish. The teaching of culture through language instruction is suggested to be a means of making second language learning relevant to the student. (RL)

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I.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN HARMONIOUS PERFORMANCES

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(Excerpts of a talk given at the Illinois Language Teachers Association November 6, 1971)

Twentieth century world wide contacts of people of nearly all human endeavors, aided by the astounding growth of rapid and economical air transportation makes it imperative that mutual understanding and adequate communication exist between a country's inhabitants and its ever increasing numbers of visitors. As a solution for this problem, one thinks first of the mutual understanding of the languages and cultures of the people involved.

However, too often teachers of foreign languages have adopted new, extreme philosophies. For example, the audio-lingual approach which emphasizes understanding and speaking quite often ignores cultural elements. The defenders of the audio-lingual method assert that by learning the structures of a language one also absorbs the culture. But we have now discovered that the pure and perfect use of a language does not always result in communication. Sometimes it leads to total incomprehension. Some contemporary plays such as those of Ionesco or Antonioni's films confirm the disastrous results of language used in a vacuum.

The statements made above do not negate the values of the audio-lingual approach, for it has many positive facets, but aim only to criticize its extreme mechanization of dialogues and pattern drills. Many well-conducted audio-lingual programs have been successful and very profitable to American students.

A most recent pedagogical wave is the emphasis given to the teaching of culture whose extreme implementation presents another danger, that is the annihilation of the development of language skills. Motivation for the study of culture is, of course greater than for the

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learning of the language itself since the students are attracted by its humanity and relative easiness. However, it is to be hoped that the knowledge and understanding of another culture are not gained at the expense of learning the spoken language. The study of culture cannot be complete without relating it to the study of the language of the socio-cultural group whose culture is being examined and vice-versa.

Let's define briefly the most basic part of the statement: What is Culture?

A common-denominator type of definition inspired by several cultural anthropologists would convey the thought that *cu'ture* refers basically to a system of values, beliefs and traditions which fashions the outlook, the conduct and the aspirations of those who form part of a particular social structure. I, for my part, like the often quoted definition of a French politician and writer, Edouard Herriot.

La Culture, c'est ce qu'il reste quand on a tout oublié.

What is left in a person born and raised in a certain cultural milieu when he has forgotten most of the components of his formal training? The answer is: a set of behaviors anchored deeply in him, so profoundly inlaid in his personality that wherever he goes, whatever he does, he is carrying them with him. "La culture ça se vit," says again Herriot.

We could illustrate *ad infinitum* the tight bonds between language and culture. Since they are so intimately related, how can one possibly be taught without reference to the other? I would like to see the integration of culture occurring at each stage of the teaching of the language. Whatever the method is, a language utterance presented to the students generally relates to a wealth of cultural elements, and these elements form chains extending in multidimensional directions. An example of this is the word *wine.* One connotation is its mealtime use by the French family. For children, it is diluted with water; adults will usually drink it pure, and connoisseurs will consume about a half dozen types of wine at one meal, each one being related to the specific food being eaten. In another dimension wine is one of the main products of France. Its exportation is important in the French economy. A third dimension is the use of wine at different levels of society. Also, the word *wine* elicits venerable values of the French people (tradition, regionalism, friendship, etc.), and these are worth explaining at length, so that at least a tolerant attitude toward the word can be developed by the learner.

Patterns of life can be determined through cultural explanation of many words.

The main problem in such a pluralistic approach is that of choosing from the wealth of cultural patterns which arise from the

language of a people those which relate best and most directly to the major themes underlying the value system.

One will soon realize that those little heteroclyte cultural talks will soon cross and recross the large generative lines of the socio-cultural system, and that some kind of synthesis can be done with the students in order to rediscover the general value lines of the cultural system.

Let's see, for example, how a simple cultural topic such as, "faire les commissions" contains items calling important themes of the French value systems:

The main custom to be noticed here is that French people go shopping for food every day in order to buy the freshest possible comestibles (bread, eggs, vegetables, fruits, and meat). This points out one of their greatest pleasures in life, the art of eating, and brings the most considerable attention to the art of cooking in which the housewife takes great pride. Both of these elements enter into the great cultural line of the Art of Living. Also, by selecting the best possible food for the least amount of money, the housewife displays her loyalty to the value of the family. In addition, by going to the best specialty shops, where she is known, she exemplifies what the French value highly–individualism. Common sense is also demonstrated by the fact that she shops carefully and wisely. The value of friendship plays a part in the errands for food: many times socializing is done in the shops. The housewife knows that she is going to see some of her friends and would not go out with her hair in curlers. The sense of justice is also revealed, for the housewife wants to be dealt with fairly and she chooses the local shopkeepers where she can be assured of an honest trade.

These major themes of the value system, after having been brought out by the teacher, can be illustrated by performances on the part of the student. From the theme, "Faire les Commissions," stem related activities of all kinds illustrating cultural concepts. For example: the metric system, as exemplified by the weights, measures, volumes, and money systems can be illustrated in the buying of bread and wine, milk, coffee and cheese. After the material has been presented, some of the following learning activities can be established:

(1) Role-playing. Let a student make up a skit and dialogue about the housewife and the shopkeeper. Change desks into shops with signs, vegetables, fruits, etc.

Sample Dialogue – "Chez le charcutier"

Le charcutier – Et vous, Madame, vous désirez?
La dame – Trois tranches de jambon.
Le c. – Epaisses?

La d. – Non, minces.
Le c. – Voilà. Ça vous fera 4F 50. Et avec ça, Madame?
La d. – Ce sera tout. (elle paie)
Le c. – Merci, Madame.
La d. – Aurevoir, Messiurs Dames.
Le c. – Aurevoir, Madame.

(2) Bulletin Board. Show pictures of all of the French specialty shops.
(3) Comparison Study. Contrast French and American methods of shopping for food.
(4) Individual study groups. Prepare booklets with advertisements for foods with prices.
(5) Debate. Discuss the pros and cons of specialty shops and supermarkets.

Attitudes can be developed through these activities: respect for the individual, greetings in stores, personal appearance, respect for the food when served (one shows admiration and makes compliments).

As you have just seen, there are many ways of implementing cultural objectives, and it is here that the creative ability of the teacher can bloom.

We have observed in an evaluation of a two-week workshop on French Culture, held at Trevecca College in Nashville this past summer, that the students of the demonstration class remembered best the elements of culture which were presented to them through situations in which they were actively involved. High on the list of typical French comportment came the reactions of French drivers. Not only did the students remember well the cultural elements but also the language involved in specific situations such as a slight accident.

Drawing from that experience, I would suggest that:

(1) Meaningful situations be devised whenever possible to illustrate the points of culture.
(2) That performance objectives be clearly limited (whether they are few or many) and measured.

Then student activities involving culture and language can be improvised to convey the objective. Try to involve as many students as possible in the performance. Give them as many opportunities as possible to act out and to demonstrate some of these customs.

Performance objectives may range from the ability to react appropriately in a social situation, and/or the ability to "explain" a pattern, either informally or by relating it functionally to other patterns, to the ability to obtain information of a cultural nature

without antagonizing the interviewee, and/or the ability to develop a positive attitude toward the people speaking a different language, and a sympathetic interest in specific members of the group.

How could any of the following words, found in the first five language units of any basic material, be introducted to the student without some elaboration on their cultural connotation? Not to do so would permit the student to visualize the American concept and transpose it to the foreign term. Here are two series of most common terms (one in French, one in Spanish) which must be thoroughly culturally understood by our students.

Bonjour	merci	père	mère
maison	étage	heure	temps
dimanche	pain	déjeuner	commissions
vacances	jardin	eau	fromage
téléphone			
buenos días	gracias	padre	madre
casa	domingo	comida	patio
tortilla	agua	semana	centro
padres	ir de compras		

Let me signal a few cultural traits about some of the above words and illustrate how in the very early stages of language learning, ignoring the cultural content of very simple words would lead not only to a misconception of the meaning of the words, but also to an ignorance of when, how, and in what circumstances the term is used. Let's take as an example the word *pain.* For the majority of our American students *pain* is visualized as a loaf of white bread, sliced, wrapped in a waxed paper or plastic which we buy at the supermarket along with other food. How far are we from *pain* which is bought every day, sometimes twice daily, at the bakery, fresh, crusty, still warm, and unwrapped, which we carry home for immediate consumption. The notion of cleanliness has to be discussed at this point. The fact that the bread is not wrapped does not mean that it will result in a sick family. Also it should be noticed that no bread plate is ever set at the table. Bread lies on the table at the left of one's plate, never on the plate.

Words like *maison,* and *casa,* necessitate explanations. European homes tend to be less open to outsiders than American homes. However, once a person is known and invited to a home, he is received with the proverbial hospitality: "esta es su casa," or "la casa es chica pero el corazón grande," and even "Donde comen tres comen cuatro." There is no limit to the generosity of Europeans once the first barrier is overcome. Of course, *maison* and *casa* mean house as well as home. An elaboration of the distribution of houses

along a street should be included. Also to be discussed are: how the houses are numbered, how the stories are counted, how one should act when entering an apartment house at night, etc.

The word *déjeuner* in France elicits an entirely different concept than here. To list but a few differences, we note that it occurs between 12:00 and 2:00 p.m. During that time most stores are closed. Most restaurants will not serve meals between 2:00 and 7:00 p.m. One is expected to eat a full dinner at noon for it is the most important meal of the day. Table manners differ greatly from those here: Don't fill your plate (you will be offered another helping), don't put one hand on your lap under the table while eating (some wisecracks might be thought or said), both hands should be on the table, do talk and compliment the hostess about the food, don't be afraid to elongate the "déjeuner" by accepting a coffee and a liquor while enjoying the conversation.

A word like *eau* does not convey the same connotation in France as it does here. It is not customary to be received in a French restaurant with a glass of cold water. Asking for one is also frowned upon. However, mineral water is customarily available, and small carafes of water are put on the table accompanying the wine. Not as much water is used for washing and cleaning as in the United States; hot water is expensive, therefore rarer.

The concepts of *heure* and *temps* are also much different. Although "business time" is usually kept exactly, such is not the case for social occasions. Guests for a dinner or a party must *never* be ahead of time, not be on time, but arrive somewhat late, thus giving the hostess plenty of time to be ready.

When literature is introduced in a Foreign language program, the student is confronted with new words and expressions, and he must understand the cultural connotations reflected in the expressions. He can then grasp fully the deep meaning and the values underlined by the author, and compare them with the corresponding American values.

For example, if the student in the French class reads the phrase, "Cet homme est bon comme le bon pain," he should immediately be aware that "bread" is associated with what the Frenchman values most, as compared to the Anglo-Saxon who values "gold." (Cf. recent word *bread* meaning money).

> Just as words are taught in context, so should the different phases of culture be taught in context. Soon the student will be able, by reason of his training in class, to spot additional examples of the things discussed by his teacher and thus strengthen and make permanent his understanding of the target culture. (Virgil Miller:

"Teaching Culture thru Reading," SCOLT, Feb. 1969, Atlanta.)

It is obvious that the levels of language of Madame Bovary de Flaubert, Thérèse Desqueyroux, de Mauriac, and Zazie de Queneau belong to different strata of society, and that, therefore, their modes of expression are expected to be different. Speech patterns denote cultural levels. When Queneau has Zazie say, "Bin sur. Ya jamais de flics dans les bistros. C'est défendu," he pictures her expressing herself according to the milieu, "popular class," to which she belongs. These words would be out of place in the mouth of Mme Bovary, and for Thérèse Desqueyroux it would denote an unexpected manner of speech.

For a complete description and classification of the cultural values found in French literature, one can refer to the colossal work of Howard Lee Nostrand, *Background Data for the Teaching of French–Final Report of Project, DE-6-14-005* and in a less voluminous form to Tora T. Ladu, *Teaching for Cross-Cultural Understanding,* State Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, N. C. 1968. F.L. Publication no. 414.

Teachers should bear in mind, at any level of teaching, that the learning of language skills is not an end in itself.

Students today are demanding relevance in the curriculum. In order to meet this demand we can no longer depend on fragmented teaching, where each discipline develops in its own traditional manner. There must be a welding of languages, literatures, cultures, and related disciplines into a new synthesis which will make cross-cultural studies one of the focuses of American education.

By intimately relating language and culture in our language classes we are showing our students that through the study of a new code of communication they are becoming familiar with the insight of a foreign culture, thus contributing on a humble level to a greater understanding of other peoples, which is one of the most pressing problems confronting man today.